

FACT SHEET MULCHING

Mulching For Water Smart Home Gardens

Why Mulch?

One of the best things gardeners can do is to use mulch. By using mulches gardeners conserve water where it's needed most; in the soil and within the root zone.

Mulches reduce soil moisture loss by as much as sixty percent and decompose to provide water holding organic matter which is retained in the soil.

Mulch is any protective layer that is laid on the ground to reduce soil moisture loss, maintain even soil temperature, control weeds and enrich the soil. Woodchip, straw and lucerne are some of the commonly used garden mulches and are all easily available in Bathurst.

Mulching reduces soil temperatures by several degrees, creating a cool root run which many plants including roses and many of our northern hemisphere trees really benefit from.

Which Mulch to Use?

For vegetable gardens and flower beds a fine mulch like pea straw or sugarcane mulch is ideal. Anything that is of the pea or bean family like lucerne or pea straw will give the added benefit of providing one of the major plant nutrients, nitrogen, to plants.

Woodchip mulches will be slower to break down and less prone to being scratched about by birds. For most trees and shrubs woodchip mulches are a good choice. Woodchip mulches come in a range of modern colours which can add appeal to garden beds but do require maintenance to keep them looking good.



Woodchip mulches provide a very durable mulch for garden beds

It is generally not recommended to use animal manures as mulches unless they have been composted. Un-composted animal manures will likely contain weed seed. If using un-composted animal manures like sheep, cow or horse manure it is best to lay them under a generous mulch layer of aged lucerne hay or woodchip to suppress weed seed germination.

Best Method Mulching

When it comes to how deep to apply your mulch the general guide is around 8cm depth for woody mulches, or the length of your index finger. For vegetable and herb gardens which receive more regular watering a 5cm layer is suitable for finer mulches like sugarcane mulch.



Fine mulches are ideal for vegetable gardens

Remember to keep the mulch away from the trunks and stems of plants to prevent rot from developing.

Laying several sheets of newspaper or flattened cardboard boxes under the mulch will help starve weeds of sunlight and help smother any young weeds.

It's recommended to add fertiliser under the mulch as this way nitrogen is not lost to the air. Soil bacteria will break down the mulch and they use the same nutrient that plants use, nitrogen, as their food source. By applying either a high nitrogen fertiliser or a complete fertiliser under the mulch you safeguard against plants running short on this important nutrient.

If you have access to very recently chipped woodchip it is recommended to let the woodchip age for three months before use. This is to avoid nitrogen drawdown associated with fresh mulch.

One of the simplest and most economic ways to make your own mulch is to rake up leaves and mow over them with a catcher on the mower. You can easily stockpile these shredded leaves by bagging them into old feed bags or garbage bags so you have mulch available for later use.

It is advisable to wear a dust mask when applying mulches to avoid breathing in mould or dust

When to Mulch

You can apply mulches at any time of year. For best results apply mulch to wet or moist soil to trap in soil moisture. Mulching newly planted trees and shrubs is highly recommended as this can help reduce transplant shock and improve plant establishment.

Autumn is a great time for applying mulch in cold climates as mulching helps conserve soil warmth. This extends the growing season giving gardeners a slightly longer flowering and harvest period.

Avoid mulching in cold tableland areas when you want an early harvest of vegetable or fruit crops as leaving dark soils uncovered in early Spring will assist with soil warming.

Irrigation and Mulches

Where possible it is best to use in-line drip tube under the mulch. This low flow irrigation product is suited for a wide range of landscape applications including garden beds, vegetable gardens and intricately shaped landscape beds.

These in-line drip tubes apply water to plants at a slow consistent rate, reducing the risk of run-off and water wastage. Since they are laid beneath the mulch there is no risk of spray drift or over-spray as can occur with sprinklers. When using sprinkler irrigation on mulched beds significant amounts of water will be used rewetting mulches versus wetting the soil and plant roots directly.



Inline drip tube irrigation laid on the soil ready for mulching

For vegetable gardens or areas where seedlings are being established micro-spray irrigation may be used in conjunction with in-line drip tube with sprinklers used in the initial stages only. Once plants have established then in-line drip tubes are a more water efficient option.

In-line drip tube can be purchased from most hardware stores, is easy to install and can mostly be laid around bends and corners without the use of joiners.

Always check Water Restrictions when operating or scheduling irrigation to your garden.

Where to Obtain Mulch

Mulches such as pea straw, sugarcane mulch and lucerne mulch can be obtained from Garden Centres in bagged form. Where larger quantities are required it is generally more cost effective to purchase mulches from a landscape supplier or purchase mulch grade hay or straw in baled form direct from the grower.

For large area woodchip mulching a mulch shovel or mulch fork is a real advantage for moving mulch more efficiently. These tools have much larger shovel or fork head than conventional tools and can be purchased from most hardware stores.



Mulch forks help move large volumes of woodchip mulch



Woodchip bark blowing is a quick and cost-effective mulching option for large areas

For very large area mulching jobs bark blowing provides a cost-effective option compared to forking and barrowing. Bark blowing service providers can deliver around fifteen cubic metres of woodchip mulch to your site. The mulch is blown around trees and other plants using a large pipe. This provides a very quick way of laying large volumes of woodchip mulch.

Mulch is available for free from the Bathurst Waste Management Centre for residents in private vehicles. This mulch is made from chipped green waste and whilst it may contain weed seeds it can be useful in many circumstances. Council staff can load the free mulch into your private vehicle or trailer every day of the week at set times. For more information about Council's free mulch please phone 6333 6111.

WATER *Let's make it last.*

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